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***Building a fun, feminist, and forward space together:
Our research and mentoring collective***

Can you provide us with some basic background on the Feminist Geography Collective at UT-Austin and its history?

Our Collective brings together faculty, graduate and undergraduate students from within and beyond the discipline of geography. We strive to foster healthy and vibrant academic spaces for women, and particularly women of color, to engage in feminist geographic research. We aren't the most radical a feminist collective can be. We have found ourselves working *within* the neoliberal constraints of the discipline as a strategy to survive, thrive and support one another. However, we do have a broader vision of a more just discipline. For us, the journey there centers a feminist practice where mentorship and research are inseparable, and where students are sheltered from, can thrive within and supported to challenge the racisms, sexism and other structural violences of the discipline.

Dominica: We started out in the fall of 2016 with the mentor-research relationship between Caroline (a faculty member), myself (a graduate student) and Annie (an undergraduate). I first met Caroline in 2014, when I was an undergraduate at UT and took her *Geographies of Globalization* class. I had no experience with feminist geography, and was amazed at what the discipline could look like. Excited about Caroline's NSF project on the beauty trade in East Africa, I reached out to see if I could help work on it. She invited me to come to Uganda with her and do my senior thesis research there. Over the next year, I switched *out of* geography and into the Humanities stream in the College of Liberal Arts. This enabled me to design my own "feminist geography" major. Over the next two years Caroline mentored me intensively on all the pieces that go into building a research project and career: human subjects applications, getting funding through college, university, and national awards, developing written papers and presentations. I worked with her over two summers in Uganda, and wrote my senior thesis and Master's thesis on the beauty trade there. Our relationship completely altered the trajectory of my life. I liked research but I had never imagined myself following an academic career. Slowly I built up the courage and confidence, the conviction, to see myself as a geographer. Caroline worked with me to apply for graduate school and while I felt lucky to get several offers I chose to stay at UT. I valued Caroline's mentorship and I felt passionate about paying the labor and love forward to others.

Annie: I learned about Caroline and Dominica's work through an undergraduate research bazaar. Hardly any students went to their session (including me) but I learned through a friend about their focus on beauty. I had taken classes and a study abroad with Juliet Hooker and Ted Gordon in African and African Diaspora Studies and was already committed to antiracist, postcolonial and feminist work. I immediately felt that emphasis in their approach to research, to

academia, and to each other. So, it felt like a good fit from the start. In addition, UT is a large and sometimes alienating institution, and my majors (International Relations and Government) both felt very masculinist, intimidating and inaccessible. There were some nice faculty of course, but as a discipline I didn't see my ideas, or many people like me, there. I could tell that Caroline and Dominica had this intensively supportive relationship and I was seeking that out. And even though I wasn't a geographer, I immediately felt accepted and valued and then incredibly excited about what I could do, how I could approach the world.

By the time I started working with them they had developed a lot of resources together, all stored online. This collective memory was incredibly useful for me (and continues to be as I prepare for graduate school applications in the fall). As I moved through my own undergrad research process, I started to contribute to it myself. I had a lot of insider knowledge of the College through my service work with the Liberal Arts council. I brought what I knew about undergraduate research grants, curricular requirements and other UT opportunities to our growing collective memory, with future students in mind. That following fall, in 2016, we began to meet for two hours every week in the Geography department, and we began to think and talk of ourselves as a "collective".

Dominica: In terms of how we work, we've always viewed research and mentoring as inseparable. Peer-mentoring operates across career-stage and based on our different skills and experience. Caroline took the lead at first in guiding us on grant writing, fieldwork and publishing. I mentored Annie on, say, writing her first literature review, presenting at conferences, and now applying to grad school. As we grew, she started to mentor new undergrads in, say, writing AAG abstracts, developing projects, making posters, and conducting more basic research work. Stuff I had taught her and Caroline had taught me. Now as new members join, and as we each learn new skills, we all start to mentor more junior members down the line.

Annie: But while we do tend to mentor "down" in this way, we want to also stress the multilateral flows of knowledge. More junior members have brought skills in, say, web design, popular writing, archive development and critical cartography, and they have taken the lead in teaching us these. Those contributions have extended the scope of our work dramatically and in exciting ways. We try to each value our own unique and diverse skill sets, areas of expertise, and embodied experiences, using them to strengthen the group as a whole. We feel this is essential both to the success of the collective and to the depth and rigor of the work. We always stress the collaborative nature of our work and we make sure to credit our members and the wider group. We celebrate each other's successes as our own.

Caroline: I think this co-mentoring piece is essential in thinking of ourselves, and acting as, a collective. Dominica was a strong mentor for Annie from the start, she was passionate about it, and Annie herself quickly became a valuable mentor, organizer and resource for us both. They have both also been incredibly important resource for me. They know the institution so much better than I do and they also had lots of wisdom about undergraduate opportunities, and undergraduate life. They're also much more savvy about tech stuff and social media (so

important, I learned, if you want to study beauty). But I think more broadly, having feminist connections has been so important for me. They've been an amazing source of support in different ways. We've learned a lot together and we're committed to keeping that co-mentoring element. It's a foundational piece we foster and protect as we grow.

What were your initial intentions or aspirations for coming together?

Dominica: For me they feel very basic: we loved our work and we wanted, *needed* to build a feminist community. Folks in UT Geography are doing important work with social justice implications, but we were reaching out to faculty in Women's and Gender Studies, Sociology, English and elsewhere to have explicitly feminist conversations. We wanted to make a home for ourselves in our department, and to build a community of feminist geographers at the undergraduate, graduate and faculty levels. Caroline had tried recruiting new feminist graduate students and faculty, but it was challenging. Feminist work is still too often met with suspicion, misunderstood, seen as too 'political', or not rigorous enough. We learned that there are so many structural challenges around faculty and graduate recruitment. After a few years trying we needed another strategy. We knew there were fantastic undergraduates at UT and that many women (in particular) longed for feminist spaces. So we decided to start there, to build from within.

Caroline: Before we formed the collective, I had no experience with research 'labs' as such. I did most of my research alone up to that point or co-wrote with close colleagues and friends. And while I had always taken a very hands on role in mentoring students, this was usually done on a one-on-one basis. It was rewarding, and remains central to my work, but as we know it's emotional labor and incredibly time consuming. It's also largely unrecognized and devalued labor (in terms of metrics for tenure and promotion) that women and minority faculty spend many more hours on. Like many similar institutions, UT is affected by the same neoliberal shifts many of us are experiencing, and the promotional pressures to publish are intense. While my research and mentoring work has always been intertwined, in the past my mentoring-based relationships rarely led to publications or other "outputs". And that was fine. But in 2015 I started to realize the tenure requirements were going to be more demanding. And I also had my son. Juggling the publishing, my commitment to mentoring and quality teaching, and being part of his life was hard. Of course this is familiar story for anyone caring for family or friends, and again this is work disproportionately done by women. It's a work model that's unsustainable and unhealthy, as feminist geographers and others have been telling us for a while now (Berg et al 2016, Mountz et al 2015, Mullings and Peake 2016, Caretta et al. 2018, Hawthorne and Meché 2016). The tenure and promotion statistics for women, and particularly women of color, are bleak - at UT and across geography as a discipline (AAG 2016; Kobayashi 2006, 2007; Sanders 2006). I knew I needed a healthier way to work. To share the mentoring labor out, and also to create a supportive feminist space for research.

Dominica and Annie: Definitely one of the unexpected insights of the collective is that we've developed empathy for how power works and disciplines us differently across the life course. As students, we now see that, as you move along in your career, things actually get busier, the

pressures get more intense, the responsibilities for others and the juggling get crazier. And for Caroline, I think she's more aware of the intense pressures students today are under. It might seem naive but that wasn't something we really understood before. That empathy brings a sense of responsibility to care for one another, including for Caroline. We understood that in being there for one another as students, we were easing the burden on her. In doing that caring work, we created this space of encouragement and affirmation that had been so difficult to find on such a large university campus. We made a space where we, as women, could get on-hands research experience, share our ideas, and connect with others excited by feminist approaches. The opportunity to be mentored and to mentor others provided us with the confidence and support necessary to thrive within the discipline and outside of it.

Caroline: Reading our words of course it's clear that, despite the different career and life stages we're at, our experiences all speak to the structural violences that remain so prevalent in academic and wider life: the devaluation of care work, the uneven work of mentoring, the neoliberal metrics of success that widen racial, class and gender divides, and the trivialization of feminist work, and of women's ideas, that can lead us to work harder and think less of ourselves. The collective was a space for us to do the work that we found nourishing, exciting, and fun, that shielded us from, to paraphrase Minelle Mahtani, the 'toxicities' of academia.

Dominica and Annie: Of course this is a huge challenge, and we don't claim to have the answer. But our collective is a modest attempt that we feel has been deeply-supportive for its members. We make it sustainable (both in the everyday and in terms of getting into grad schools, getting promoted, getting tenure) by collectively sharing this labor and ensuring that this work is institutionally recognized. For this to be sustainable it has to be healthy, so we work to create caring and affirming spaces where we can all share the frustrations of academia and our insights for navigating it. It is a place to laugh, cry, reflect on our experiences, take note of the operations of power in our daily lives, and keep moving forward.

Question 2. How have conversations or interventions changed over time?

Caroline: Most notably our collective has adjusted to build an explicitly anti-racist feminist space. Our projects and our praxis demand that racial power is unveiled and confronted. However during our first year we struggled with racial justice, both in small, everyday discussions about the racial makeup of our peers and departments, and in broader conversations around systemic inequality. While passionate about feminist ethics of care and mentorship, we weren't attentive enough to the ways in which we ourselves perpetuated systems of racial violence. One way we saw that was in our recruitment. Our first round of recruiting was informal and primarily focused geography and IR/ Government students that Dominica and Annie knew. We had fantastic new recruits, and they all identified as White. Even though we thought of ourselves as *critical* scholars, our lack of explicit attention to race and power during the recruitment reproduced the overwhelming whiteness of our respective disciplines (Berg 2012, Kobayashi 2006, Faria et al in review).

Annie: We met to reflect and collected some useful resources on building diversity in academia. We decided to respond through our messaging on the website and in our next recruitment drive. Extending our reach beyond Geography, we strategically reached out to and recruited from more diverse departments and programs such as the Center for Women's and Gender Studies, the African and African Diaspora department, the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, and the Middle Eastern Studies department. We created a more formal application 'advert' which specifically encouraged scholars of color to apply and asked applicants to talk about their commitments to antiracist and feminist work. We also sought to make our collective more inclusive (and anti-racist) by ensuring that members either receive academic credit and/or financial compensation for their work. We try to work with various work schedules and provide compensation for, say, our end of semester dinners and research trips to ensure that students are not inhibited by funds, which is often (though not always of course) a concern for minority students. As a direct result of these efforts, our collective is now actually majority-minority at each career stage. And we're now more deliberate about creating a space that is not dominated by white bodies and norms of whiteness (not always but often the same). This is an important step to ensuring that the future of Geography is inclusive, innovative, and better reflective of our world.

Dominica: This shift in our membership and our more deliberately intersectional approach has dramatically shaped our discussions, the work we do, and the questions we ask more broadly. It forces us to constantly reflect on and be attentive to intersectional systems of power. In the process, we have become better equipped to *recruit, support, and retain* scholars of color. In our most recent end-of-semester reflection, our newer members each remarked on how the collective transformed their perception of Geography as they gradually felt more space and support. Our collective is in a constant process of learning and unlearning and while we have much work still to do to make our collective racially and socially just, we are excited and proud of the progress we have made.

Question 3: At what level or site have your conversations or interventions been directed (i.e. your home department, the University more broadly, the publishing industry)? Can you reflect on the successes and limitations of those organizing efforts, conversations or interventions?

Dominica: We strive for visibility as a way to build communities within and outside of our university. Though it sometimes felt like we were talking to ourselves (not at all a bad thing), we were also in conversation with our department, college, university, and wider discipline. Ranging from publicly announcing our successes on departmental blogs, presenting our work in various college wide research competitions, and publishing in Geography journals, we strategically engaged on multiple scales to survive and thrive within the context of hostilities, fear, suspicion and/or misunderstandings around feminist work.

Annie: Caroline has pushed us to be proud of and vocal about our work and success. So often women are told to keep quiet in the name of modesty. Forget that. We wanted to see and be seen at UT and the discipline, as geographers. We deliberately meet in a glass walled room in

the middle of the department. We make visible the awards, honors, and grants we earn. We encourage each collective member to present a poster of their original research at AAG. We put our posters up in the walls of our department and in the corridors that lead to it. We post news items about our achievements to our departmental website, include reference to the collective in any public speaking opportunities, give conference talks about our work, and have started to write articles and give other kinds of public interviews about our work. In addition to showcasing what feminist research can look like, we have adopted this hyper-visible model in order to affirm and make overt our place within Geography.

Caroline: We are starting to sound a bit colonial! But there's another motivation too. We hope that this visibility will further encourage people who might not have been attracted to the discipline (and particularly women of color) to consider classes, doctoral tracks and careers in the field. The visibility makes it possible for the discipline to be remade for and invigorated by women and women of color. It challenges the whiteness of the discipline in healthy and disruptive ways. But it has to be meaningful, and I think it is. Several of our new members have already said they learned about and began to consider the university and department because they came across our website. We certainly recognize that not all collectives want to be visible, invisibility can be protective. But for us, advertising the collective and our success has allowed us to gain recognition for our work, to carve out some space for ourselves. And it has encouraged students to *see themselves* in the discipline and to join us. We feel it's vital to re-present and reimagine geography to the world and to one another.

Question 4: What are some of the challenges to forming and sustaining a collective space in the University? How do you maintain this space and ensure continuity?

Dominica: One of the biggest challenges for many of us is the shift to thinking and working with the group in mind, rather than individually. It means working with other people's schedules, not just your own, communicating carefully, learning to listen, managing others, and helping them to manage themselves. We understand that missing a meeting or a personal deadline affects more than just ourselves. And while we make room for that, there is a sense in the group of responsibility for one another. That can feel like a burden, but then also a safety net when you're the one that needs it. In the first year of the collective, I took the role of the collective organizer. I didn't have much experience leading a group and I struggled with communicating and structuring the students' tasks. In addition to my own classes and research demands as a first year MA student, it felt overwhelming. Thankfully Annie, who had long participated in various campus organizations and councils, took the lead. In the process, she helped us better understand and meet the organizational needs through new weekly emails, a system of tracking grant deadlines, etc. I learned that organizing well shouldn't mean doing all the work myself. It was an important reminder to move away from hierarchical structures and make use of the varied skill sets our collective already possessed.

Annie: Even with this sharing of logistical and mentoring responsibilities, we still face the challenge of requesting labor of students that are already tapped. The neoliberal demands to fill CVs, working part and full time jobs and taking full course loads mean the students are already

exhausted. As such, we are working to find ways to distribute the labor of the collective such as appointing specific members to update our website, write the weekly emails, take turns in the more tedious work. We encourage the junior undergraduate students to help new members get acclimated and work with them. It's not easy finding ways for the group to work for us all. And that can only be achieved really if we work cohesively, with some big picture common interests in mind. Logistically we've also figured out ways to help the students balance their work. For example, we encourage them to get course credit for a couple of semesters they work with us, and make sure we understand and help them move towards their own personal goals for their time with the group. Whether it's research for a thesis, experience learning a new skill, or just space to breathe for a few semesters.

Caroline: In terms of new challenges, in the fall, we will be growing a lot. We will have four faculty, two graduate students, and about seven undergraduates. We're really excited about the new members, their research, and the wisdom they will bring around working collectively. But we want to maintain the critical foundations of the collective, the commitment to one another, and the larger sense of purpose around feminist and antiracist activist scholarship.

Question 5: Have there been particular texts that you all have read together?

Caroline: Finding common intellectual ground at the start is so important, but it has been hard. Most students are not coming in as geographers and if they are they have very little, if any, feminist foundations. At the start we had students reading sections of my NSF proposal alongside Dominica's undergraduate thesis. We paired this with Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies* (2016) and Hyndman and Mountz's "*Feminist Approaches to the Global Intimate*" (2006) so that students could learn more about the foundations and methodologies of our approach. These did give a crash course in the basic theory and methods we were working with, and the empirical details of the field site, but it was a very narrow introduction of what feminist geography is/can be. It was also a lot of reading and maybe a bit advanced for the students. We've rethought that a lot. Now we introduce the projects to members ourselves and, maybe twice a semester, integrate in a reading or lecture to discuss together.

Dominica: As the political scope of the collective became clearer - challenging academia's racist and sexist violences - we have started to more deliberately share, reference, and watch anti-racist feminist work. As such, our new reading list includes the former pieces and expands upon them by incorporating more work that specifically speaks to racial power and is written by women of color. This list includes formative pieces such as: Kobayashi's "Anti-Racist Feminism in Geography: An Agenda for Social Action" (2007), Mohammad's "'Insiders' and/or 'outsiders': positionality, theory and praxis" (2001), Mahtani's "Challenging the Ivory Tower: Proposing anti-racist geographies within the academy" (2006), and Mollett's "Anti-racist Geography" (2017). We know that the reading list is political, and we've been inspired by Dr. Christen Smith's #citeblackwomen project. We want the readings to reflect our commitment to support women of color, by making sure we are engaging with and recognizing the influence of their work.

Annie: Something I have really enjoyed is that we now incorporate lectures and videos into meetings, in addition to or instead of academic readings. We live streamed Minelle Mahtani's talk at last year's Critical Geography conference on Toxic Geographies, and went to lectures by Pavithra Vasudevan and Martina Caretta when they were on campus. Looking beyond Geography, we've also attended several talks by feminist and critical race scholars across campus. Further, we've begun co-sponsoring visits, like Katherine McKittrick's last spring, and have invited graduate and postgraduate speakers from Switzerland and Germany. We hope in the future to expand by adding other creative feminist expressions such as performance art and activist events.

Caroline: We want to use the collective to showcase the varieties and possibilities of feminist work. These alternatives are also useful because they help balance the increasing demands on already tired students. There's a lot of important and exciting work out there but this isn't a feminist geography class. We did create a curriculum of sorts, but we're rethinking that and instead building a set of references, videos, podcasts our students can engage with. One goal is to extend the website to include these resources, and to link to established lists like the black geographies and geogfem collections. That's a project for the fall!

Question 6: Can you offer additional advice to existing feminist geography collectives or those looking to form them in the future?

As feminist faculty you're probably already doing so much of what forms the foundation of a collective like ours: caring labor, connecting people, building mentoring resources, listening and sharing ideas, worrying about and striving for different geographic futures. Maybe you're already in a sort of collective if you're part of wider feminist geography communities. For us it was about stopping the struggle to model ourselves on what we were told/felt was valued, and start with what we loved, what was important to us.

As we've noted, our collective has grown and changed significantly in the mere two years since we formalized. And we're still learning. But we're not starting out of nowhere nor are we alone. We owe much to other feminist geography collectives such as those found at the University of Georgia, the University of North Carolina Chapel-Hill, and the regional Great Lakes Collective. We have looked to and connected with these groups who have longer histories and who have inspired us greatly. Though our collectives all may look different, we share a common goal: a desire to build supportive, anti-racist, and feminist spaces. There are many ways to affect change. Find what works for your group and go forward.

And here we recognize that in many ways we *are* still working within a neoliberal, patriarchal system. Our focus on helping members succeed in terms of professional metrics (grants, awards, papers etc.) also works to reinforce that system. We also know that in many ways we've adopted a 'lab model', but one with critical foundations. We sometimes even use that name, calling ourselves the UT's Feminist Geography "lab" when we know "collective" won't register or will be received with suspicion. By co-opting the term, we also feel that we are

challenging the basic assumptions of what a lab is and reclaiming its feminist potential. Maybe this a bit optimistic. But we read Katz' work on minor theory (perhaps too generously but hopefully she won't mind) as a sort of permission to disrupt the major with these modest, quiet but powerful moves.

We can already see small ripples of change within our department and college, and in ourselves. While Geography (including the subfields of critical and feminist Geography) remains very white, we have built a majority-minority space and we're doing the work we love in a way that feels restorative and energizing. We're being recognized as innovative scholars (in 2017 Annie won the Social Science thesis award for the College of Liberal Arts in 2017 and Dominica was awarded an NSF GRFP). But more importantly, we see and feel that our ideas are important. *Who* is making knowledge matters and we feel we have a space where we can ask different questions and build new geographic futures.

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